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LETTER
OF
HORACE GREELEY



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LETTER
OF
HORACE GREELEY

TO MESSRS. GEO. W. BLUNT, JOHN A. KENNEDY, JOHN
O. STONE, STEPHEN HYATT, and 30 others,
Members of the Union League Club.



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BY THESE PRESENTS, GREETING!

To Messrs. GEO. W. BLUNT, JOHN A. KENNEDY, JOHN O. STONE, STEPHEN HYATT, and 30 others, members of the Union League Club.

GENTLEMEN: I was favored on the 16th inst., by an official note from our ever-courteous President, John Jay, notifying me that a requisition had been presented to him for “a special meeting of “the Club, at an early day, for the purpose of taking into consideration the “conduct of Horace Greeley, a member “of the Club, who has become a bondsman for Jefferson Davis, late chief officer “of the Rebel Government.” Mr. Jay continues :

“As I have reason to believe that the signers, or some of them, disapprove of the conduct which they propose the Club shall consider, it is clearly due, both to the Club and to yourself, that you should have the opportunity of being heard on the sub-

ject ; I beg, therefore, to ask on what evening it will be convenient for you that I call the meeting," &c., &c.

In my prompt reply, I requested the President to give *you* reasonable time for reflection, but assured him that *I* wanted none ; since I should not attend the meeting, nor ask any friend to do so, and should make no defense, nor offer aught in the way of self-vindication. I am sure my friends in the Club will not construe this as implying disrespect ; but it is not my habit to take part in any discussions which may arise among other gentlemen as to my fitness to enjoy their society. That is their affair altogether, and to them I leave it.

The single point whereon I have any occasion or wish to address you is your virtual implication that there is something novel, unexpected, astounding, in my conduct in the matter suggested by you as the basis of your action. I choose not to rest under this assumption, but to prove

that you, being persons of ordinary intelligence, must know better. On this point, I cite you to a scrutiny of the record :

The surrender of Gen. Lee was made known in this city at 11 p. m. of Sunday, April 9th, 1865, and fitly announced in *THE TRIBUNE* of next morning, April 10th. *On that very day*, I wrote, and next morning printed in these columns, a leader entitled “Magnanimity in Triumph,” wherein I said :

“We hear men say :—‘Yes, forgive the great mass of those who have been misled into rebellion, but punish the leaders as they deserve.’ But who can accurately draw the line between leaders and followers in the premises ? By what test shall they be discriminated ? * * * Where is your touchstone of leadership ? We know of none.

Nor can we agree with those who would punish the original plotters of Secession, yet spare their ultimate and scarcely willing converts. On the contrary, while we would revive or inflame resentment against none of them, we feel far less antipathy to the original upholders of the ‘resolutions of ’98’—to the disciples of Calhoun and McDuffie—to the Nullifiers of 1832, and the ‘State Rights’ men of 1850—than to the John Bells, Humphrey Marshalls, and Alex. H. H. Stuarts, who were schooled in the National faith, and who, in becoming Disunionists and Rebels, trampled on the professions of a lifetime, and spurned the logic wherewith they had so often unanswerably demonstrated

that Secession was treason. * * * We consider Jefferson Davis this day a less culpable traitor than John Bell.

“But we cannot believe it wise or well to take the life of *any man* who shall have submitted to the National authority. The execution of even *one* such would be felt as a personal stigma by every one who had ever aided the Rebel cause. Each would say to himself, ‘I am as culpable as he; we differ only in that I am deemed of comparatively little consequence.’ A single Confederate led out to execution would be evermore enshrined in a million hearts as a conspicuous hero and martyr. We cannot realize that it would be wholesome or safe—we are sure it would not be magnanimous—to give the overpowered disloyalty of the South such a shrine. Would the throne of the House of Hanover stand more firmly had Charles Edward been caught and executed after Culloden? Is Austrian domination in Hungary more stable to-day for the hanging of Nagy Sandor and his twelve compatriots after the surrender of Vilagos?”

“We plead against passions certain to be at this moment fierce and intolerant; but on our side are the Ages and the voice of History. We plead for a restoration of the Union, against a policy which would afford a momentary gratification at the cost of years of perilous hate and bitterness. * * * * *

“Those who invoke Military execution for the vanquished, or even for their leaders, we suspect will not generally be found among the few who have long been exposed to unjust odium as haters of the South, because they abhorred Slavery. And, as to the long-oppressed and degraded Blacks—so lately the slaves, destined still to be the neighbors, and (we trust) at no distant day, the fellow-citizens, of the Southern Whites—we are sure that their voice, could it be authentically uttered, would ring out decidedly, sonorously, on the side of Clemency—of Humanity.”

On the next day, I had some more in

this spirit, and on the 13th an elaborate leader, entitled "Peace—Punishment," in the course of which I said :

" *The New-York Times*, doing injustice to its own sagacity in a characteristic attempt to sail between wind and water, says : ' Let us hang Jeff. Davis, and spare the rest.' * * * We do not concur in the advice. Davis did not devise nor instigate the Rebellion ; on the contrary, he was one of the latest and most reluctant of the notables of the Cotton States to renounce definitively the Union. His prominence is purely official and representative : the only reason for hanging him is that you therein condemn and stigmatize more persons than in hanging any one else. There is not an ex-Rebel in the world—no matter how penitent—who will not have unpleasant sensations about the neck on the day when the Confederate President is to be hung. And to what good end ?

" We insist that this matter must not be regarded in any narrow aspect. We are most anxious to secure the assent of the South to Emancipation ; not that assent which the condemned gives to being hung when he shakes hands with his jailer and thanks him for past acts of kindness ; but that hearty assent which can only be won by magnanimity. Perhaps the Rebels, as a body, would have given, even one year ago, as large and as hearty a vote for hanging the writer of this article as any other man living ; hence, it more especially seems to him important to prove that the Civilization based on Free Labor is of a higher and humaner type than that based on Slavery. We cannot realize that the gratification to enure to our friends from the hanging of any one man, or fifty men, should be allowed to outweigh this consideration."

On the following day, I wrote again :

* * * * “ We entreat the President promptly to do and dare in the cause of magnanimity. The Southern mind is now open to kindness, and may be magnetically affected by generosity. Let assurance at once be given that there is to be a General Amnesty and *no* general Confiscation. This is none the less the dictate of wisdom, because it is also the dictate of mercy. What we ask is, that the President say in effect, ‘Slavery having, through rebellion, committed suicide, let the North and the South unite to bury the carcass, and then clasp hands across the grave.’ ”

—The evening of that day witnessed that most appalling calamity, the murder of President Lincoln, which seemed in an instant to curdle all the milk of human kindness in Twenty Millions of American breasts. At once, insidious efforts were set on foot to turn the fury thus engendered against me, because of my pertinacious advocacy of mercy to the vanquished. Chancing to enter the club-house the next (Saturday) evening, I received a full broadside of your scowls, ere we listened to a clerical harangue intended to prove that Mr. Lincoln had been Providentially

removed because of his notorious leanings towards clemency, in order to make way for a successor who would give the Rebels a full measure of stern justice. I was soon made to comprehend that I had no sympathizers—or none who dared seem such—in your crowded assemblage. And some maladroit admirer having, a few days afterward, made the Club a present of my portrait, its bare acceptance was resisted in a speech from the Chair by your then President—a speech whose vigorous invective was justified solely by my pleadings for lenity to the Rebels.

At once, a concerted howl of denunciation and rage was sent up from every side against me by the little creatures whom God, for some inscrutable purpose, permits to edit a majority of our minor journals, echoed by a yell of “Stop my paper!” from thousands of imperfectly instructed readers of THE TRIBUNE. One impudent puppy wrote me to answer categorically

whether I was or was not in favor of hanging Jeff. Davis, adding that I must stop his paper if I were not! Scores volunteered assurances that I was defying public opinion—that most of my readers were against me—as if I could be induced to write what they wished said rather than what they needed to be told. I never before realized so vividly the baseness of the Editorial vocation according to the vulgar conception of it. The din raised about my ears now is nothing to that I then endured and despised. I am humiliated by the reflection that it is (or was) in the power of such insects to annoy me, even by pretending to discover with surprise something that I have for years been publicly, emphatically proclaiming.

—I must hurry over much that deserves a paragraph, to call your attention distinctly to occurrences in November last. Upon the Republicans having, by desperate effort, handsomely carried our State

against a formidable-looking combination of recent and venomous apostates with our natural adversaries, a cry arose from several quarters that I ought to be chosen U. S. Senator. At once, kind, discreet friends swarmed about me, whispering "only keep still about *Universal Amnesty*, "and your election is certain. Just be "quiet a few weeks, and you can say what "you please thereafter. You have no "occasion to speak now." I slept on the well-meant suggestion, and deliberately concluded that I could not, in justice to myself, defer to it. I could not purchase office by even passive, negative dissimulation. No man should be enabled to say to me, in truth, "If I had supposed you "would persist in your rejected, condemn- "ed Amnesty hobby, I would not have "given you my vote." So I wrote and published, on the 27th of that month, my manifesto entitled "The True Bases of "Reconstruction," wherein, repelling the

idea that I proposed a dicker with the ex-Rebels, I explicitly said :

“I am for Universal Amnesty—so far as immunity from fear of punishment or confiscation is concerned—even though Impartial Suffrage should, for the present, be defeated. I *did* think it desirable that Jefferson Davis should be arraigned and tried for treason ; and it still seems to me that this might properly have been done many months ago. But it was not done then ; and now I believe it would result in far more evil than good. It would rekindle passions that have nearly burned out or been hushed to sleep ; it would fearfully convulse and agitate the South ; it would arrest the progress of reconciliation and kindly feeling there ; it would cost a large sum directly and a far larger indirectly ; and—unless the jury were scandalously packed—it would result in a non-agreement or no verdict. I can imagine no good end to be subserved by such a trial ; and—holding Davis neither better nor worse than several others—would have him treated as they are.”

Is it conceivable that men who can read, and who were made aware of this declaration—for most of you were present and shouted approval of Mr. Fessenden’s condemnation of my views at the Club, two or three evenings thereafter—can now pretend that my aiding to have Davis bailed is something novel and unexpected ?

—Gentlemen, I shall not attend your

meeting this evening. I have an engagement out of town, and shall keep it. I do not recognize you as capable of judging, or even fully apprehending me. You evidently regard me as a weak sentimentalist, misled by maudlin philosophy. I arraign you as narrow-minded blockheads, who would like to be useful to a great and good cause, but don't know how. Your attempt to base a great, enduring party on the hate and wrath necessarily engendered by a bloody Civil War, is as though you should plant a colony on an iceberg which had somehow drifted into a tropical ocean. I tell you here, that out of a life earnestly devoted to the good of human kind, your children will select my going to Richmond and signing that bail-bond as the wisest act and will feel that it did more for Freedom and Humanity than all of you were competent to do, though you had lived to the age of Methuselah.

I ask nothing of you, then, but that

you proceed to your end by a direct, frank, manly way. Don't sidle off into a mild resolution of censure, but move the expulsion which you purposed, and which I deserve if I deserve any reproach whatever. All I care for is, that you make this a square, stand-up fight, and record your judgment by Yeas and Nays. I care not how few vote with me, nor how many vote against me; for I know that the latter will repent it in dust and ashes before three years have passed. Understand, once for all, that I dare you and defy you, and that I propose to fight it out on the line that I have held from the day of Lee's surrender. So long as any man was seeking to overthrow our Government, he was my enemy; from the hour in which he laid down his arms, he was my formerly erring countryman. So long as any is at heart opposed to the National unity, the Federal authority, or to that assertion of the Equal Rights of

All Men which has become practically identified with Loyalty and Nationality, I shall do my best to deprive him of power; but, whenever he ceases to be thus, I demand his restoration to all the privileges of American Citizenship. I give you fair notice that I shall urge the reënfanchisement of those now proscribed for Rebellion so soon as I shall feel confident that this course is consistent with the freedom of the Blacks and the unity of the Republic, and that I shall demand a recall of all now in exile only for participating in the Rebellion, whenever the country shall have been so thoroughly pacified that its safety will not thereby be endangered. And so, gentlemen, hoping that you will henceforth comprehend me somewhat better than you have done, I remain,

Yours,

HORACE GREELEY.

New York, May 23, 1867.



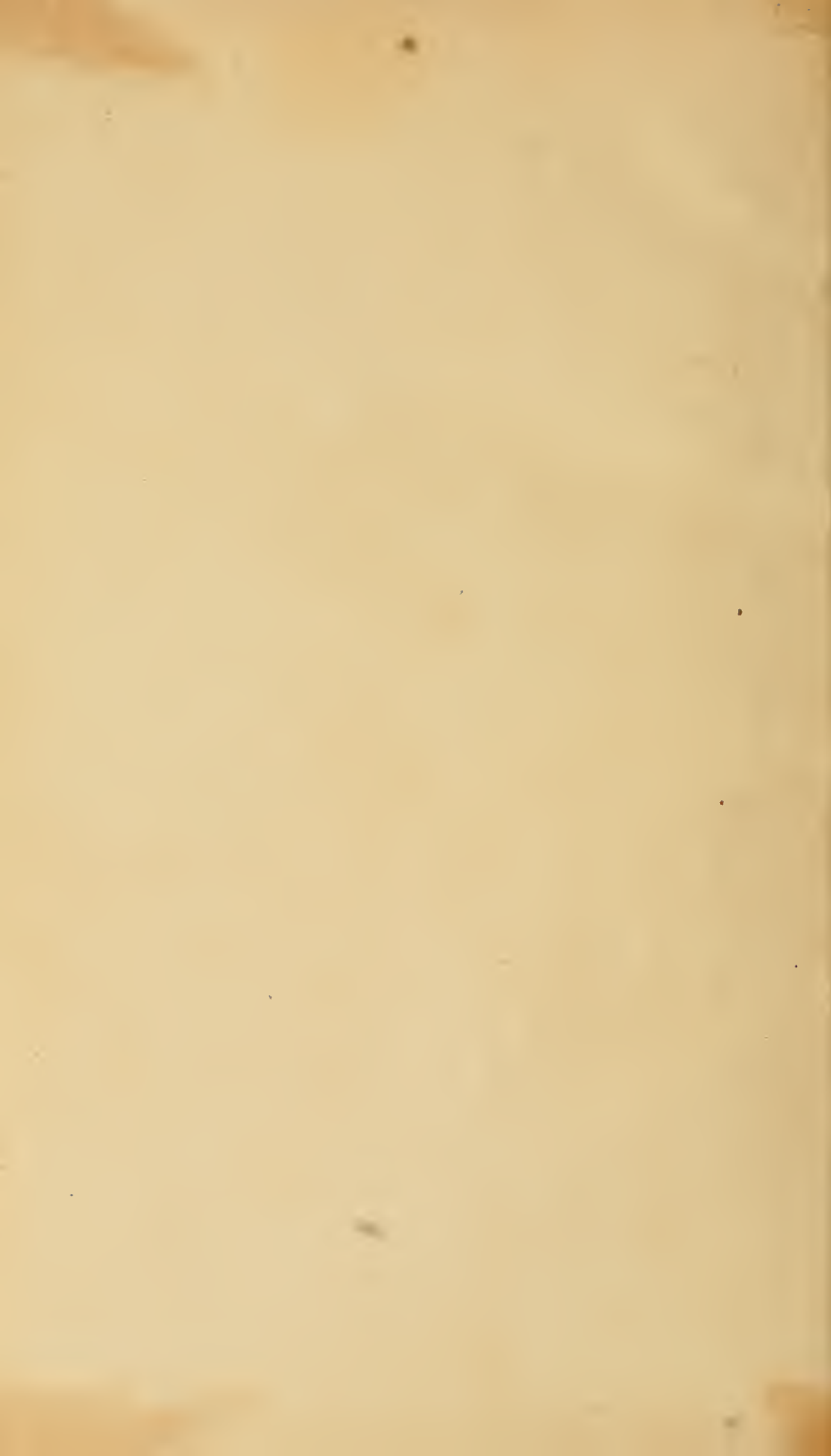














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